Phreaking Out the Monopoly

By Ronald Lichty

"Welcome to the Second International Phone Phreak Convention," read the banner in the grand ballroom of New York's Diplomat Hotel Sept. 8.

Into the room streamed a myriad of people--over 300 in all. First, there were the mostly long-haired phone phreaks, who were in the vast majority. Then there were the media people, a score or more of them, the *Village Voice*, NBC, AP, ad nauseum, reporting the latest chic scene. And then there were the phone company employees--the on-duty ones, that is--there to let the phone company know what the technofreaks were planning next.

The large ballroom filled up fast. Around the floor, people played with electronic displays demonstrating the technical aspects of how tones work, how the red box (a device which simulates the sound of coins dropping into a coin phone) works, how the blue box (a device used to place free long-distance calls) works.

On signal, a half-dozen video tape monitors sprang to life and the convention began in earnest. The screens portrayed the technology of using a keypunch--employing it to spindle extra holes in a Bell Telephone billing card--in a sequence titled "The Next Best Thing to Being Rich." Novitiates closely watched the TV screens; the more experienced and more knowledgeable phone phreaks moved into the corners, quiet clusters of technological guerrillas exchanging subversive wisdom.

The TV picture shifted to an outlaw version of "The Shari Lewis and Lamb-chop Show". Complete with canned laughter, the two puppets and the long-haired show host demonstrated what *not* to do to a telephone billing card, mangling it into an unuseable wad. Then, finally, the puppets made a credit card telephone call, carefully explaining each step along the way.

And then, the commercial, modeled after one of those drippy cosmetic ads. "I called a friend using a phony credit card," moaned a sorrowful girl with tear-filled eyes. "The phone company called her and she told them I was the one who called. She didn't know any better. But now they want me to pay over $200 in calls. What can I do?"

Tom Knight photo

"Well, Suc, get your friend to change her story," the calm voice smoothed out some of the wrinkles in Sue's worried face. "Unless she's signed a written statement, they have nothing to prove you made the call."

The picutres on six screens faded to snow and 100 pairs of eyes shifted to the stage. Spelled out on a banner hung above the stage was the phone phreak who founded the Youth International Party Line on Mayday 1971 by handing out brochures at the "Shut Down Washington" demonstrations, introduced himself and then the convention guidelines.

"We have masks on the table near the door. Please take one. Last year, we discovered while looking over photographs after the convention was over that some of the media people taking pictures were Bell security people. The masks are for your protection. Besides, it will give the media something to talk about."

Indeed. It looked like a convention of cat burglars. But the caution was valid--last year's convention drew fewer than 100 people, a few more than half of them suit-and-tie clad telephone company employees.

"Pa Bell is trying to raise the charge for a local call from 10 to 20 cents, citing their increased costs," continued Al in an angrier tone. "That isn't the reason. In 1966, Bell published a direct distance handbook which states, 'The local call will be raised to 20 cents by 1974.' To that, we say, "Two dimes is too much!' "

Video tapes and workshops continued all morning and afternoon, exploring both old and new ways rip off Pa Bell, from the boxes, red, blue and black (a device used to receive long distance calls free), to tape recordings of coins dropping into pay phones to building phone taps.

But the real show as the phreaks themselves and their incredible wealth of technological know-how of defeating Bell and all of its space-age circuitry. "To protect our great country from itself," reads a leaflet, "To rip off the phone company before they rip off me," says a phone phreak. Whatever.

It's happening. And, like the video tape said, "The blue box is only the tones. And *we're going to win.*"

(NYNS)

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into a monopoly situation in every town. I've seen it happen every place I've worked. And once that competition goes, the initiative goes, too.

Quite a few alternative newspapers are beginning to spring up all over the place, mainly because the regular daily newspapers are dead on their feet and there's just a big gaping hole for these publications to fill. Most of them start out being hip, which narrows their audience, but they gradually start expanding coverage, and they are going to become a big force in journalism. And it's going to happen because they are willing to use some of these techniques, I think, where the regular newspapers are not.

COHEN: Do you think the daily press could successfully adopt some of these techniques?

WOLFE: It could be done. Jimmy Breslin used to write a column five days a week in the Herald-Tribune in which he went out and covered the day's story and wrote it up using these techniques. It was like getting a non-fiction short story every morning for a dime, when papers used to cost a dime. It can be done. It takes skill and good reporting. I think it would make what happens every day a whole lot clearer.

Susan Goldbaum photo

As it stands now, most reporters write their story in a conventional manner and then they all go to a saloon after work, have a few drinks, and tell each other over a martini, because gin is the cheapest high, what actually happened that day. You hear these marvelous stories that never get into print.